STOCKTON AXSON[1]

1867–1935

AMONG the many kinds of discourse in which Stockton Axson excelled was the memorial address. Some of his most characteristic utterances are to be found in his tributes to the illustrious dead. His eloquence, his deep and generous affections, and his underlying faith were manifest as he showed us the way to speak out on occasions such as this, when our bearing is all too likely to be sombre and formal, when our words stumble and fall far short of their goal. I am thinking of the memorial meeting held at Washington in May, 1922, when Dr. Axson spoke in praise of the late Henry P. Davison, his associate in the war-time work of the Red Cross:

> It is not to a lonely grave on Long Island that our thoughts go this afternoon, but to the living presence that infected us with its own vibrant youth. The significant fact is not that Mr. Davison is dead, but that he lived; so the chief note of our tribute is not of sorrow but of triumph.

I am thinking too of the words with which he opened his tribute to his old teacher, Professor Caleb Winchester, at the services held at Wesleyan University, May, 1920. Thus he began:

> We are met to commemorate a life, a beautiful life, extensive in influence, unusually complete in accomplishment.
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> The relatives of Professor Winchester, and we who were privileged to be his friends, and we who are his disciples in the teaching profession,

[1] An address in memory of Stockton Axson, Professor of English Literature at the Rice Institute, 1913–1935, delivered at the Rice Institute, February 9, 1936, by Alan Dugald McKillop, Ph.D. (Harvard), Professor of English, to which the author has appended a bibliography of the published writings of the late Professor Axson.

> We that have loved him so, followed him, honored him,
> Lived in his mild and magnificent eye,
> Learned his great language, caught his clear accents,

we, in our hearts, must mourn his death. It would prove us insensible to the endearing human quality of him if we were not saddened by the reflection that we shall hear his voice no more, nor ever again behold him in his simple human kindness and grave and gracious dignity.

But I must think that we shall honor him most fittingly by tempering sorrow with gratitude; by thinking more of what we have had in his life than of what we have lost through his death. . . .

This address has always seemed to me a model in its kind, with its tempered gravity and graciousness, candor and charm. By such a voice and such a pen should Stockton Axson himself be memorialized. But though in this respect he has left no one behind him who can be a spokesman of his worth and power, in another sense he has left more witnesses than can be heard or reckoned—all of you who are here, all of his colleagues on whatever faculty, all of the students who ever entered his classroom at Vermont or Adelphi, at Princeton or Rice, nay more, all who ever heard his voice, all those who in countless crowded halls in countless cities came under the spell of his personality. In the face of this, full eulogy is impossible, and yet it is my consolation that even faltering praise cannot be altogether in vain, for it will take little, knowing him as you did, to lead you to think and feel more than I can say, and thus you may "piece out our imperfections with your thoughts."

Stockton Axson was a son of the manse: his father, both his grandfathers, and at least nine others in the three generations before him on both sides of the family were Presbyterian clergymen.[1] The traditions of his father's family

[1]Most of these particulars are drawn from a "Memorial of Rev. Isaac Stockton Axson, D.D.," by the Rev. John Jones, in *Minutes of the Synod of Georgia,* 1892, pp. 17–21. For this material, and for other references below concerning Samuel Edward Axson and Nathan Hoyt, I am indebted to the courtesy of Dr. S. M. Tenney, Curator of the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

centered about the "Old White Meeting," the Independent or Congregational Church at Charleston, known after 1806 as the Circular Church. Here his great-great-grandfather, Job Palmer, had been a deacon for more than half a century. One of the grandsons of Job Palmer was Isaac Stockton Keith Axson, who bore the name of yet another clergyman, the Rev. Isaac Stockton Keith, a Pennsylvanian educated at Princeton and from 1788 to 1813 co-pastor of the Independent Church. "To each child named after himself or either of his three wives he bequeathed a copy of Woodward's edition of Dr. Scott's Commentary on the Bible." If such a bequest was duly made in 1813, when Isaac Stockton Keith Axson was born at Charleston, nothing could have been more appropriate, for that name was to take an honored place in the annals of the Presbyterian Church in the South. Predestined to the ministry, I. S. K. Axson was educated at the College of Charleston and the Columbia Theological Seminary, and licensed and ordained by the Presbytery of Charleston. His early career as a preacher falls in with the history of a colony which came from Dorchester, Massachusetts, to settle Dorchester, South Carolina, at the end of the seventeenth century, and then in the middle of the eighteenth century made a second removal to Medway or Midway, Georgia. The Congregational Society there established, Congregational in form and Presbyterian in doctrine, became one of the most famous churches in the state. I. S. K. Axson was for two years pastor of the old Dorchester Church in South Carolina, and then became co-pastor at Midway. He preached the centennial sermon in that historic church in 1852. As the hurried traveler speeds north nowadays on United States Highway 17 he passes what is left of Midway, about thirty miles south of Savannah. The lonely church and the burial ground across

the road are intimately associated with the history of Georgia, but to the pilgrim from Texas the most immediately significant association must be that Stockton Axson's grandfather preached here and that here his father was born. In 1853 I. S. K. Axson became president of the Synodical Female College established by the Presbyterians at Greensboro, Georgia; in 1857 he began his memorable pastorate at the old Independent Presbyterian Church of Savannah, where he served until his death in 1891.

His son, Samuel Edward Axson, was born at Midway in 1836, educated at Oglethorpe University and the Columbia Theological Seminary, and licensed by the Presbytery of Charleston. He was thereafter successively city missionary at Augusta, Georgia, pastor at Beech Island, South Carolina, and then at McPhersonville, in the same Presbytery, chaplain of a South Carolina regiment from 1862 to 1864, pastor for a short time at Madison, Georgia, and then at Rome from 1866 to his death in 1884.[1] In 1858 he married Margaret Jane Hoyt, daughter of the Rev. Nathan Hoyt, another distinguished clergyman, who brings a Yankee element into this family history.

The life of Nathan Hoyt is a characteristically American saga of courage and piety.[2] Born in Gilmanton Township, Belknap County, New Hampshire, in 1793, the son of a soldier of the Revolution, he studied and taught in New England country schools and at the High School at Salisbury, New Hampshire, but poor health and the disturbances attending the War of 1812 made it impossible for him to go

[1] *Minutes of the Synod of Georgia,* 1885, pp. 11–13.

[2] In *The Dead of the Synod of Georgia,* ed. John S. Wilson, pp. 293–319, is a biographical paper prepared by Chancellor Lipscomb of the University of Georgia and based on Nathan Hoyt's autobiography. Shorter accounts are to be found in *Minutes of the Synod of Georgia,* 1866, p. 19; J. M. Wilson, *The Presbyterian Almanac,* 1867, p. 437; George Howe, *History of the Presbyterian Church in South Carolina* (Columbia, 1883), II, 773.

on to college as he had hoped. In search of a cure and a vocation he traveled to Saratoga, New York, and after much prayer and study was licensed by the Presbytery of Albany and began his work as city missionary at Troy. In quest of a milder climate he removed to South Carolina in 1825, where he organized a church at Beech Island. Soon he proceeded to Washington, Georgia, and then became pastor of the Presbyterian Church at Athens, "where, under the very eaves of the University, he preached the gospel with great success for thirty-seven years." His pastorate at Athens extended from 1830 to 1866, the year of his death. Near the close of his autobiography is the notation, "Two of my sons are preachers, and my youngest daughter, Mrs. M. J. Axson, is the wife of a promising young preacher." It is with the son of this young couple that we are concerned, and we cannot dwell longer on earlier generations, though a biographer who had the opportunity, the evidence, and the intuition could weave a subtler web.

Stockton Axson, who originally bore the full name of his father's father, was born at Rome in 1867. After elementary schooling at the Procter School for Boys in Rome, he was sent for his secondary education to Savannah, and also attended for a time the Fort Mill Military Academy, South Carolina. The untimely death of both parents, the mother in 1881 and the father in 1884, put the children under the care of other kinsfolk, and, in the words of Dr. Axson himself, made his elder sister Ellen Louise "the responsible member of the family." In spite of bereavement and the uncertainty about the future which at the best confronts youth, Stockton Axson could say with the Psalmist, "The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage." The general background of his family history is prophetic of his future career. The Presbyterians

of Georgia were a small minority in his grandfather's generation; for 1831 the historians give the figures as 32,000 Baptists, 27,000 Methodists, 3,000 Presbyterians. But of all the denominations the Presbyterians were most solicitous for a learned ministry and all that that implies; in the 1820's they had organized the Georgia Education Society for the purpose of aiding their ministerial candidates to secure a higher education; by 1830, despite their small numbers, they had got control of the University of Georgia, somewhat to the chagrin, it may be added, of less book-learned brethren of other creeds. Both of Dr. Axson's grandfathers shared this zeal for schools and learning. For him, as for Woodrow Wilson, the deep-rooted sanctities of the Presbyterian inheritance were interwoven with the love of books, with a cultivation of good thought and good speech which was akin to reverence and worship. And so, though the young Axson spent some time in his uncle's warehouse in Savannah, and though it was thought that he might go into the business, he sought further knowledge of books by a kind of homing instinct. "And thus," as old Thomas Fuller put it in the seventeenth century, "God moldeth some for a schoolmaster's life, undertaking it with desire and delight, and discharging it with dexterity and happy success."

If we turn to the general social background, here too we find a significant setting for his career. As he himself afterwards pointed out in one of his lectures on American literature, his somewhat unsettled boyhood had brought him to know the South under various aspects; he contrasts his native hill-country of northwestern Georgia—"one of the most democratic regions of our America," he calls it—with the old town of Savannah, the place of his middle boyhood, a repository of aristocratic tidewater tradition. Thus in early life, to continue to paraphrase his own remarks, he could

supplement and correct the literary legend of a romantic past with first-hand knowledge of the varied landscapes and societies that go to make up what is roughly known as "the South." He grew up just at or just after a dramatic turning point in political history which had the gravest effects on social and cultural history; the first time he saw the American flag, he says, it was as the flag of an alien conqueror. Of his early reading he remarked in the same lecture: "I think I almost knew by heart the contents of William Gilmore Simms's *War Poetry of the South*—I can see the old green cloth-bound book now." Fondly he names over the favorite pieces of his boyhood—Randall's "My Maryland," Palmer's "Stonewall Jackson's Way," Oliver's "All Quiet Along the Potomac Tonight," Marie de La Coste's "Somebody's Darling," Caroline Bell's "Jacket of Gray," Timrod's "Carolina," Father Ryan's "The Sword of Robert Lee" and "The Conquered Banner."

But his generation did not dwell morbidly on the past. With his fellow-students at Davidson and the University of Georgia he looked forward to reflect the promise of the future. The historian of the University of Georgia notes a rapid change in the spirit of the place after the worst days of reconstruction, a surprisingly complete acceptance of new conditions of life and a recognition of the fact that what was now needed was not an education as the badge of a ruling class but as the working equipment of a citizen. The boys were not always preternaturally solemn about reunion and reconciliation—youth has a lighter touch—but, to whatever degree consciously and deliberately, some of them found a way to bridge the gap between North and South naturally, by way of the freemasonry of education. After all, if you will allow me a somewhat remote reference, Calhoun went to Yale and there were boys from Charleston at Harvard

before the war. Once again the filaments were stretched from southern college to northern university and back, and an intellectual comradeship that transcended the lines of states and sections made for renewed progress and understanding. You will readily see how all this applies to the careers of Woodrow Wilson and Stockton Axson, made dear friends and virtually brothers by the marriage of Woodrow Wilson and Ellen Louise Axson in 1885. Wilson had gone north to teach at Bryn Mawr and then at Wesleyan; Axson, after a year at Davidson College in 1884–85, was an undergraduate at the University of Georgia from 1887 to 1889. It must have been about 1888 that, in Axson's own words, his brother-in-law wrote to him that "he had an inkling that I could be made into a serviceable teacher of English, and suggested that I come to Wesleyan and study under 'the foremost teacher of English literature in America'." The last phrase was Wilson's, a deserved and early recognition of Caleb Winchester's distinguished work. Middletown, Connecticut, must have been quintessential New England in 1890, when Stockton Axson took his Bachelor's degree at Wesleyan. After a year of graduate work at Johns Hopkins he returned to the pleasant New England scene and proceeded to his Master's degree under Winchester in 1892. It is hard to keep to chronological order in this sketch, and our thoughts go forward to a later time when Winchester was nearing the close of his half century of service and when Wesleyan sought Stockton Axson as his associate and eventual successor. By the time his formal education was completed, what he himself has said of Woodrow Wilson might be said of him, that these fruitful early experiences gave him a truly national instead of a merely sectional or provincial point of view; this development was of the greatest importance for the historian

Wilson, and it counted for much too in making Stockton Axson a great teacher, scholar, and citizen.

When he began to teach literature in the early nineties, first at the University of Vermont and then at Adelphi, English instruction in American colleges was changing very rapidly indeed. In composition, the old days of forensics, of sophomore declamations and senior rhetoricals and professors of rhetoric and oratory were passing away; the new era of the "daily theme" was beginning. Bliss Perry, one of Dr. Axson's Princeton friends, notices a decline in interest in debate and public speaking during this period. This reaction has now gone so far that college teachers of English as of other subjects appear to be as innocent of rhetorical arts as the babe unborn, and carefully eschew the sophisticated devices that lead to effective speech. All who have heard Dr. Axson will agree, I think, that in method and training he owed something to the elder tradition. The old-fashioned professor of rhetoric may have required deflation at times, but at least he knew that good speeches don't come by the light of nature, and so it was with the old-time preacher and politician and lawyer. Thus the boy ambitious for a career would see eye to eye with his teacher; social and educational standards coincided. Dr. Axson tells us in his reminiscences that Joseph Ruggles Wilson and his son Woodrow Wilson rehearsed sermons and speeches in the forest and out in the barn. I was not in his autobiographical confidence in this matter, but who can doubt that his consummate skill on the platform was the result of lifelong interest in the technique of public speaking, of inveterate practice and arduous training? On a certain poet-critic whose lectures were not a success at Johns Hopkins, he remarks that he "was not a professional lecturer and probably had never surmised that public lecturing is a profession in it-

self—is an art, and a delicate art." The inherited tradition of the pulpit and the southern courthouse, the emphasis in the older college curriculum on oratory, must have been transmuted in the early experience of Stockton Axson into a sheer love of proficiency in the delicate art, and into a lifelong interest in the stage. Of the bearing of this on his remarkable powers of interpreting drama I will speak later. It is enough to say just here that every great teacher must have a keen sense of the histrionic, must thrill to the immediate response of class or audience. If a man keeps to his study and looks on his classes as inevitable interruptions of his work, he may be a scholar—though this is not necessarily the way to become a scholar—but he is certainly not a teacher. He must accept the challenge of the situation in the classroom. The born teacher will overcome reluctance and inertia, preoccupation with his own affairs, even physical distress and disability, and get out on the firing line again. Once more I am ahead of my story. Those of us who knew Stockton Axson in the years when he was weighed down with ill-health and sorrow knew also that he never refused the challenge, that as he confronted his hearers he drew on fresh reserves of energy and resolutely marshalled the resources of the art that had never failed him.

To return to the state of things in the nineties, graduate instruction in the eastern universities was by this time deeply colored by the methods imported from the philological seminaries of Germany. The tendency was to study the language rather than the literature, and that in its earlier stages, to concentrate on the technicalities of Old and Middle English. Sometimes the current opinion seemed to be that if a graduate student allowed his attention to stray elsewhere his attitude was unprofessional, not to say frivolous. At Hopkins the young Axson came into contact with scholarship

of this kind, but he could not identify it with his own deepest inclinations and interests, though in later years he would always grant with characteristic modesty and candor that such things needs must be. For a vivid picture of Stockton Axson as a young graduate student I turn to a page of reminiscences kindly communicated by Professor Frederick Tupper of the University of Vermont:

> My acquaintance with Stockton Axson was really "not new to begin" when I met him in the fall of 1890 at the English Seminary table of Johns Hopkins University. Indeed it was ante-natal and ante-bellum, for youth of the generation before us, his forbears and mine, had been intimate in Charleston in the brave days before the Civil War. Of that place and period—although he himself had known neither—much in his speech and manner seemed vividly reminiscent. As with many young Southerners, the one was strongly seasoned, yet the other threw graces over even his anathemas. And in these new surroundings his vituperation was frank and free. As a pupil of the genial Winchester at Wesleyan, he had hitherto subsisted on the cakes and ale served at bountiful feasts of poets, and now, when he asked even for bread, he received something that he deemed worse than a stone, platters of indigestible roots from the heavy soil of Paul's *Grundriss der germanischen Philologie*. Even the occasional presence on Hopkins ground of his brilliant brother-in-law, Woodrow Wilson, visiting lecturer in the Historical Seminary, and of his charming sister Ellen, could not reconcile him to such fare. Unlike the conformists about him, Axson resolutely refused to stomach anything so unsavory, and after vehement denunciations of dryasdusts he left us at the year's end, to find tables more to his taste.

The real difficulty in the general situation was perhaps not that English scholarship was on occasion precise and technical—I do not see how we can concede technicalities to specialists in all other subjects and deny them to the student of literature who wants to get as near to the truth as he can —the real difficulty was that ghastly results ensued when fledgling Ph.D.'s came out from the graduate schools to teach undergraduate classes who could hardly be expected to take the same attitude toward the subject as eager students in the seminars of Berlin, Hopkins, and Harvard.

Professor John Livingston Lowes, one of the greatest contemporary masters of the intricacies of textual criticism and documentation, has recently remarked, "It is, I suspect, the awe-inspiring *chevaux de frise* of technical Chaucerian scholarship which has often scared the laymen for whom Chaucer wrote from entrance upon their rights. That technical erudition, however, may safely be left by the lover of poetry until its results have fertilized the common soil." Surely Dr. Axson would have subscribed to every word of this statement, with its implications for the teaching of literature to undergraduates. Though he laid down no program, made no large claims, and went about his work not merely without fuss and pretentiousness but with excessive modesty, his whole career illustrates the importance and value of mediation between technical scholarship and the interests of the layman. The word "layman" as used here includes several different kinds of people—the undergraduate who is interested in reading but who may not, in our jargon, "specialize" or "major" or "concentrate" in English, the alumnus who wants to revive faded impressions or get new experiences, the interested townsman, not officially a part of the university community though actually a very important member, who is moved by particular zeal or general curiosity. To find the common ground on which such diverse intellectual interests can meet, requires skill of a high order.

As if to counterbalance the increasing specialization in philological studies which marked the work of the growing graduate schools, a compensating movement toward university extension came to assume more and more importance in the nineties. The American Society for the Extension of University Teaching, under the presidency of Edmund Janes James, laid down an ambitious program and looked forward

to a time when the influence of the university should be brought directly to bear on all classes in the community. Some conservative scholars looked askance at these proposals to popularize their mysteries, but the optimistic and progressive supporters of the movement went so far as to believe that they had opened up a new profession for men who combined scholarship, teaching power, and eloquence. We can see how such a program would appeal to Stockton Axson, with his infectious love of literature, his growing command of the art of public speaking, and his democratic instincts. After he had served his apprenticeship at the University of Vermont from 1892 to 1894, he accepted an appointment as staff lecturer of the American Society for the Extension of University Teaching, and held this post to the exclusion of other appointments from 1894 to 1896. In 1895–96 he edited the *Citizen,* published at Philadelphia as the organ of the Society, and here are to be found some of his earliest reviews and essays. President James and others believed in these years that the work of a staff lecturer could be sharply distinguished from that of a member of a university faculty, that the jobs were essentially different. Richard Grant Moulton and Edward Howard Griggs also held for a time staff lectureships with the Society to the exclusion of other academic connections. We can all recognize now that the university extension movement was a part of the healthful and natural growth of higher education in a democratic society, and that it must persist in some form or other, whether as the Chautauqua movement, which goes back to the seventies, as the correspondence course, or as what is called now adult education. But it has appeared that the movement, whatever guise it assumes, is most effective when conducted from a university base. Moulton eventually found himself on the faculty of the new Uni-

versity of Chicago; Griggs was at Stanford for a time, Axson at Adelphi in Brooklyn from 1896 to 1899, and then at Princeton from 1899 to 1913. Nevertheless the range of their activities was in no wise narrowed. Once again Professor Tupper, who succeeded Axson at Vermont, gives us a vivid account of the impression he made on his contemporaries in the nineties:

> It was easy to see that during Axson's two years in Burlington he had bought golden opinions from all sorts of people. The President, a Scotchman by descent, to whom blame was usually safer than praise, unreservedly regretted his resignation; the professors eyed askance any would-be successor of their friend and fellow; and the students were ready to vex the soul of a newcomer with odious and odorous comparisons. As man, scholar, and teacher, Axson had more than made good.
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> A contributor to the *Citizen* during his editorship well recalls his eager interest in every phase of his new work—work which did not last long, for in 1896 he accepted a professorship at Adelphi College, Brooklyn. His service of three years repeated the triumph at Vermont, as I found when I was summoned to that institution to discuss the successorship—for Axson had been called to Princeton. The man who was tired of hearing Aristides called "the just" would have had much to try his soul in the eulogies showered upon the departing teacher. To succeed him a second time would have been too daring a challenge to fate.

Fully to trace Dr. Axson's work as an extra-mural lecturer would carry the biographer beyond the records just now at his command. He was in a particularly favorable geographical position; the university extension movement seems to have centered at that time in the Middle Atlantic States, and though he lectured far and wide, the principal zone of his operations was the region extending from New England to Baltimore. For him it was an era of delightful sociability and of literary and personal comradeship. Would that we could recover some of those golden hours in quiet studies and crowded classrooms at Princeton, in the hotels and clubs and hospitable homes of New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, in far-ranging lecture trips and pleasant New England

vacations. Wherever he spoke and wrote, at the sessions of Chautauqua, at the Cooper Union or the Brooklyn Institute, in the editorial office of the *Review of Reviews,* in countless other places, he made new friends and admirers. New York had superseded Boston as the literary capital of the country, and in the nineties Dr. Axson saw American literature at close range. He never tired of the theatre, and could reconstruct from personal reminiscences a history of American drama during the last forty years.

Although he was no globe-trotter, his vacation tours in Great Britain in the company of Woodrow Wilson were among his fondest memories. In 1899 these two visited the Burns country, and one of Wilson's letters describes a scene in the Globe Inn at Dumfries, where they saw the poet's chair:

> One Axson could at first hardly be induced to sit in the chair, but sat gazing at it with eyes big with deepest reverence,—such delectable things am I seeing! But at last he was persuaded, and sat there for a moment or two with a face full as a child's of wondering emotion.[1]

An enduring memorial of this period is found in the dedication of Wilson's volume of essays entitled *Mere Literature,* so felicitous and so often quoted: "To Stockton Axson—By every gift of mind a critic and lover of letters, by every gift of heart a friend, this little volume is affectionately dedicated." The appropriateness of these words is enhanced by the contents of the book. The title-essay is a defense of "mere literature" (the phrase is ironical) against the "scientific and positivistic spirit of the age." In the earlier collection, *An Old Master and Other Political Essays,* published in 1893, Wilson had defended the college lecture at its best. "Are not our college class-rooms," he asks, "in being robbed

[1]Ray Stannard Baker, *Woodrow Wilson: Life and Letters,* II, *Princeton 1890–1910* (New York, 1927), 88.

of the oldtime lecture, and getting instead a science-brief of *data* and bibliography, being deprived also of that literary atmosphere which once pervaded them?" The relevance of all this to Mr. Axson's literary interests and teaching career is obvious. In an account of Wilson's family life written during the campaign of 1916, Mr. Axson observed frankly and modestly that at one time he had thought their minds were somewhat alike, and that his sister had often remarked upon this circumstance. Especially in the nineties they had a great deal in common. At this phase of his brilliant and complex career Wilson was man of letters as well as historian and political philosopher; reciprocally, Axson's perceptions of literary values, particularly in American literature, were especially keen in the borderland where history and literature come together.

During this time Princeton remained the center of his activities, and here he reached his full stature as a teacher. Henry van Dyke's son and biographer has recently written of his father's work in the English Department at Princeton:

> Especially close was the relation with Professor Stockton Axson. The two men were heartily in sympathy with one another in their approach to literature and teaching, and happily the relationship of their courses—they alternated in conducting the courses in English Prose and Poetry—drew them much together. They became fast friends. Henry van Dyke often spoke of Axson as "a sane, enthusiastic, clear, steady teacher—a believer in the glorious service which good literature renders to life." [1]

One of Axson's cardinal principles was that an essential part of the English teacher's job is to do a neat piece of work, to satisfy canons of style and form. In a lecture called "Museums of Art and Teachers of English," delivered at the Metropolitan Museum in 1912, he asks pointedly:

[1] Tertius van Dyke, *Henry van Dyke* (New York, 1935), p. 224. Reprinted by permission of Harper & Brothers, Publishers.

> Are we whose trade it is to interpret literature to younger people never to lend the touch of art to that work? Are we to handle these literary treasures with hands like the carters who haul crated pictures and statuary from the steamship docks to the museum? May we not have at least the craftsman's skill of the restorer—at least the cleverness of a clerk who displays gems to a customer and holds them to the light for the best advantage of lustre and sparkle?

At the same time he feels that this is a matter of taste and intuition rather than of procedures, techniques, or whatever else. "I am too busy teaching to know much about the 'methods'," he says with characteristic lightness of touch, and again: "We teachers tend to approximate the skill and science of those wonderful negro cooks of the Old South, who could make any dish in the world, but could not under penalty of hanging tell anybody else how they did it. It was a 'dab' of this ingredient, and 'right smart' of that, and 'some' of another; and that was as near as they could arrive at a recipe." However it was done, he did it. That is, his work made a real difference to his students; it was not merely that he knew his literature, or that he was a past master of the art of lecturing; it was the total impact of his character and personality, the courtesy and urbanity that were not of the surface but of the very center of his being, the profound respect for humanity that led him to see possibilities in the scrawniest undergraduate that ever trod the campus. A warm-hearted letter from an intimate friend of his Princeton days, Professor George M. Priest, brings him before us as he was then. Professor Priest writes (and has kindly given me permission to use what he has written):

> He never ceased to lament the "inadequacy" of his learning and teaching, which of course nobody in Princeton could take seriously for the simple reason that for the last fifty years Princeton has never had a more inspiring, more stimulating teacher than Stock was. [I am allowing the name by which he was known to his relatives and closest friends to stand here.] The boys flocked to his lectures for the sheer joy of hearing the

man talk and read. They sought him out in his apartment in shoals, as I knew from the tramp of feet and the sound of voices outside my own door. If Stock never became the minutely informed, productive scholar in a technical sense, it was because he gave his leisure time so lavishly to talk with his students and colleagues about the literature he loved so deeply. He was exquisitely sensitive to the beauties of poetry, possessing that perhaps rarest of gifts, correct intuition. . . .

He was unbelievably modest and hesitant about publishing anything of his own, though we used to beg him to have some stenographer take down one of his lectures and publish it as it stood. One of the most revealing episodes in my contacts with him happened one day when he came to my room and showed me a letter from a publisher requesting him to prepare a book. Stock was as pleased as a child and thought that he had been highly honored! The idea that he would honor the publisher by consenting evidently never entered his mind. I thought at the time, and I have thought ever since, that I have never known another case of such naïveté in a man of so much capacity and distinction.

The work of a great teacher is not transitory, but it may be elusive. Do the courses and the classes become a blur as undergraduate days recede? It may seem to be so, and yet the word fitly spoken, the germinal idea, the impress of a great personality, even the resonant tones of a rich voice—all these remain. How permanent they are, and what a difference they make, not even the man in whose memory they reside can say. The senior year is over—college generations are short—youth is often inarticulate. It must have been one of the chief joys of Stockton Axson's life that his students on occasion spoke out and told him how they felt about him. Year after year outgoing senior classes at Princeton voted him their most popular professor. And when, in May, 1913, it was announced that he had resigned his post at Princeton to accept the headship of the Department of English at Rice, the *Daily Princetonian* spoke for the undergraduates in an editorial so fraught with youthful sincerity that I quote it at length:

It is impossible for us in any adequate degree to express the profound sorrow with which Professor Stockton Axson's resignation as professor

of English has affected us. The news came as a distinct surprise. Closely allied as he has been for fourteen years with the best interests of Princeton and Princeton men, we cannot conceive of our University without him.

To Princeton men Mr. Axson typifies the ideal professor; an inspiration in our English courses, a warm, sympathetic friend and counselor—a man who has found the best things of this life, and whose pleasure, it always has seemed, was the imparting of this secret to his students. No other man has been able to inspire us with the great moral truths of existence to such a marked extent as he. No other man has been able to stimulate in his students such desire for work, such pleasure in that work, and such genuine enthusiasm for literature, for reading, and for all those finer pursuits of the mind which are included in the word Culture.

One of the needs of university education to-day is a closer connection between students and faculty. Undergraduates admire above everything else a man, and the popularity based upon the power and charm of a refined personality, as in the case of Professor Axson, is the greatest honor that they can bestow. Education needs more men of the Axson stamp; Princeton cannot do with fewer. Mr. Axson holds a peculiar place in the affections of Princeton men that no one else can fill.

Dr. Axson first appeared at Rice, I think, as a visitor from Princeton in January, 1913, when he delivered in the Faculty Chamber a series originally planned as six lectures on English writers from Dickens to Chesterton, but extended to eight by popular demand. The newspapers of that remote era tell us that special streetcar service from the corner of Fannin Street and Eagle Avenue was provided half an hour before each lecture. The crowds were destined to increase, and series to follow series, until it could be said that no scholar or teacher of the Southwest had ever won and held so wide an audience. Records of the time furnish us with an incomplete account of places and occasions: keeping within the borders of Texas I can list almost offhand not single speeches but extended series of lectures in Houston, Galveston, Dallas, Fort Worth, San Antonio, and addresses of various kinds at Abilene, Tyler, Waco, Palestine, Cuero, Waxahachie, Terrell, Victoria, Georgetown, Sherman, Austin, Huntsville, Kingsville, Brownsville, McAllen and

other places in the Valley, Yoakum, Temple, Beaumont. Literature was his delight and his constant theme—Shakespeare then as certainly later his favorite topic, but other recurring series were concerned with the romantic and Victorian poets, with prose fiction in England and America (whence issued one of the most popular of his numbers in the *Rice Institute Pamphlet*—"Approaches and Reactions in Six Nineteenth Century Fictionists"), and with American literature, particularly in its origins and its regional aspects. (One subject which I could wish he had developed more at length was stage history, both of Shakespeare's plays and of American drama within his own memory.) In all this the audience never had the impression that he was talking shop. The lectures were carefully prepared, there was heavy work back of them and they were carefully revised and revivified for each occasion; nay, it is no secret that they were written out, with key words underscored, but no lecturer ever used a manuscript more skilfully. Ian Maclaren tells us that there used to be a deep Scottish Presbyterian prejudice against preachers who read their sermons; perhaps Dr. Axson's consummate mastery of his manuscript was an inheritance from generations of Presbyterian preacher ancestors. Over and beyond the literary lectures, the pure distillation of years of thought, conversation, and study, he delivered many occasional addresses; schools, churches, societies, study clubs sought him out incessantly, and he put himself at their service most generously. It became a commonplace to say that Dr. Axson belonged to the whole educational system of Texas and to a public that was becoming increasingly eager for the best that had been said and thought in the world. Wittily and modestly he parried the compliments of his grateful fellow-citizens. "I am glad about every complimentary thing that

has been said about me tonight," he remarked at a banquet held in his honor at the Rice Hotel in 1916; "I am just as pleased as the widow in George Ade's fable, who, when a flirtatious man paid her some extravagant compliment, said, 'It is just awful to talk to me like that, and please keep on.' " During his periods of autumn residence in the East he maintained his connection with institutions in that part of the country, and with foundations such as the University Extension Society of Philadelphia and the Brooklyn Institute; but his fame and influence had now become national, and his summer lectureships took him to the Mountain States and the Pacific coast. In 1914 he was at the University of Oregon, in 1916 at the University of Colorado, in 1915, 1917, and 1920 at the University of California. Beginning with 1921 he taught for several summer sessions at the Peabody College for Teachers at Nashville. At Berkeley in 1915 his class in modern drama was so large that it was transferred to the famous Greek Theatre. A student who attended this memorable course wrote to the Houston *Post* (October 17, 1915) describing the picturesque outdoor setting, and continuing:

> When such art is illuminated and ennobled by a great personality, the hearer's enjoyment is complete. A genial wit and deep human sympathy flashed through and pervaded every discourse, utterly dispelling the cloud of dust that has so long hung over the dry word "lecture". Nor was this charm ever marred by the slightest suggestion of undue self-esteem. A submergence of self was not the least among this speaker's many attractive qualities.
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> As Professor Axson himself said, no one can talk seriously for any length of time without revealing his own character. So, in these daily lectures, he revealed *himself* as one whose ideals and practices are of the highest, whose philosophy of life is bound by no petty prejudice, whose understanding of humanity is profound, whose sympathy and kindly humor make him tolerant of all men's foibles, whose optimism is a constant source of inspiration. Small wonder that to his classes daily thronged such numbers as were attracted by no other instructor at the university.

All the while he hewed to the line in his classes here at Rice, and his students with engaging naïveté were wont to express their delight that a man of such prestige should be so affable and unpretentious. But on second thought they discovered that in this very simplicity lay an essential part of his greatness. There are various ways to teach; Dr. Axson spontaneously took a way which might well be the despair and admiration of those less happily endowed: he occupied high ground and never shifted it; he assumed, not blindly and uncritically but as a working hypothesis to which it was second nature for him to hold, that all the people he met had, or were obviously capable of having, virtue, manners, and intelligence. He did not talk about "inalienable rights"; he simply granted these rights graciously, naturally, and unquestioningly to the inquiring student or the raw young instructor, on the same terms as to the university pundit or the Washington celebrity. He used to quote with amusement a remark of President Patton of Princeton, somewhat to this effect, that by a mysterious dispensation of Providence some young men would always leave the university knowing less than when they entered it; I am probably betraying no professional secrets when I confide to you that teachers occasionally lapse into such cheerful cynicism in self-protection. Dr. Axson would quote such remarks and chuckle at them, but he never made them himself, although I remember that once, when someone suggested that college studies might be wrecking the nervous system of modern youth, he remarked with that irresistible smile of his that in his long teaching experience he had had just one student who had broken down from overwork, and several thousand students who had not broken down from overwork. He was entirely free from other vocational diseases also, such as false dignity and the assumption of

omniscience. Now though students may miss points here and there, they are keenly aware of the total personal weight back of a teacher's work; in fact, I am tempted to say that that is the one thing they never miss. Stockton Axson, without preachment or threat, by his quiet and unshakable assumptions, upheld not aggressively but unflaggingly his ideal of a university as a community of scholars and gentlefolk.

His interest in public affairs had always been that of an intelligent and shrewd observer; it had had an academic and literary basis, as I have suggested, in his particular attachment to subjects in American literature and politics. From 1910, of course, his devotion to Woodrow Wilson gave a frankly personal coloring to his political views, but in 1916, even though the national election hinged on Wilson's personality and policies, issues were impending that transcended any private allegiance. Early in that year the note of preparedness is sounding ominously in Dr. Axson's speeches; in the spring of 1917 he is advocating "conscription," what was soon to be called the draft. A later comment of his comes to mind here: "It was a strange dispensation of Providence which carried the belligerent Roosevelt through two terms of the presidency without a war and precipitated the peace-loving Wilson into the hell of violence." He passed some troubled hours in private questioning as to how he might best serve his country. In the autumn of 1917 he was speaking in the East and the South for the second Liberty Loan, but his humanitarian interests combined with his eloquence and his powers of leadership to make him the logical choice for the post which he accepted in December, when he was appointed National Secretary of the American Red Cross. From the beginning of 1918 to 1920 he was on leave of absence from the Rice Institute in

pursuance of these new duties. Into the scope and full significance of his work for the Red Cross it is impossible to enter here; he afterwards said, as Mr. George Williams tells me, that in the course of the Red Cross drives he had spoken in every state in the Union, with the curious exception of Texas. In the autumn of 1918, together with Mr. Davison, he began a visitation of the Red Cross on the various European fronts; he made an extended inspection of the work in Italy, and spent some weeks at the allied headquarters of the Red Cross in Paris. Further visitations were interrupted by the Armistice. Again in the spring of 1919 he set out for Geneva to attend the International Red Cross Congress, but it was hard for the powers to live up to the term international, and the project took the shape of a meeting of a newly formed League of Red Cross Societies composed of delegates from all countries except the Central Powers. Dr. Axson served temporarily as Secretary General of this new League. Thus he was plunged into the thick of European affairs during the mingled triumph and tragedy of the Armistice and the Treaty of Versailles. In that troubled time, which is indeed our troubled time, there was much to grieve his heart and disappoint his high hopes. But in the Davison memorial address of May, 1922, he reckons up some modern things which are to the good:

> Whether or not the individual grows better and wiser as time progresses, is debatable. Certainly there are today no better brains than Aristotle's brains, no better soul than the soul of St. Francis of Assisi. But society does certainly progress as mankind becomes increasingly conscious of the invisible filaments binding us all in one family. Immense is the significance of this tendency to reach out in alleviation of human misery beyond the separating lines of nations, races, and religions. Amid the perplexities of these modern times, there are sure and definite signs that human society is advancing. Among these signs is a Red Cross on a white field.

It was as inevitable that Dr. Axson should feel ill at ease in the America of the 1920's as that one of Cromwell's men should feel ill at ease in the London of the Restoration. How could he escape believing that the times were out of joint? He was no misanthrope and no controversialist, and he carefully avoided any intimation that his views on politics and contemporary society might be of public importance, but he could not feel that all was well with America, and he was too honest to say so. Under these circumstances, and even in the face of painfully uncertain health and advancing years, he found abiding if not complete solace in the literary studies that had always been his delight. The quality of his personality was pervasive rather than intrusive; though he could and did give us much delightful talk—and, like Dr. Johnson, he always talked his best—he was not disposed to give us something more extensive, as he might have done, under some such caption as an old and widely-experienced Scotsman once used for his own story, "The Anecdotes and Egotisms of Henry Mackenzie." From Stockton Axson the best thing his friends could wish would have been even more anecdotes, and more egotism—of that there was unfortunately none at all. One chapter of this non-existent work I would call "The Consolations of Teaching," and this would stand in natural relation to an informal record of his love for people and for books, and the history of the development of his far-ranging tastes and delicate appreciations.

Perhaps the first thing that would catch the attention of one of his students or even of a casual hearer at one of his lectures would be the persuasiveness with which he would expound the subject at hand. He got behind the author with his whole personality, so to speak, and the first effect might be something like that produced by a brilliant philoso-

pher to whom I used to listen, who in the sequence of an historical survey would expound the great philosophers so engagingly that you were almost persuaded to believe each of them in turn. But soon the careful student would discover that he had here more than a series of sympathetic utterances and appreciations; without ostentatiously unpacking a lot of scholarly baggage Dr. Axson was carefully combining, reconciling, integrating. His work was controlled by a sense of proportion, and, though the student or listener might not be fully aware of the situation, Dr. Axson was giving him a delicately balanced critical compromise, a mediation among various extremes. He avoided drastic or unbalanced estimates. Let me illustrate in a rather elaborate way. His literary tastes had been formed in the eighties and nineties, and so he had viewed at close range what might be called the silver age of American literature, and had in his day fallen under the spell of Stevenson and Kipling, as his early essays in the *Citizen* show. For Kipling, especially, he always cherished a particular fondness. Quite apart from Kipling's imperial politics, one could make a case for that particular past—call it the golden nineties, the naughty nineties, the mauve decade, or what we will—but Dr. Axson refrained. In lecturing to large mixed audiences he concerned himself a good deal with contemporary literature, and he was sensitive and hospitable to the work of new writers such as Sinclair Lewis and to the emergence of new materials and methods. On the other hand he was never tempted to overestimate the contemporary, and gently corrected those who would approach the literature of the moment as if it were an absolute beginning. He expounds the vital connection between past and present in the conclusion of one of the lectures on Browning in the *Rice Institute Pamphlet*. "We return from these pious pilgrimages," he

writes, "not in a mood of contempt for the present or of condescension toward contemporary writers, but better qualified to assess them and somewhat more exacting in our requirements of them. With minds and emotions reattuned to art sufficiently vital to resist destruction by shifting tastes and rigid qualitative analysis, we are not easily imposed upon by the little tricks, the spangles and gewgaws of little poets; and at the same time we are better prepared to welcome new true art which is abuilding all about us." Such utterances are remarkable not for the novelty of the doctrine but for the firmness of the grasp. And we could point to other mediations in his work, between extravagant patriotism and excessive humility in estimates of American literature, or between those hard-boiled modern critics who would limit Shakespeare to what the actor intended and the audience found at the moment, and those of an elder school who would overload Shakespeare with philosophical subtleties; between those critics who would judge art by the moral it points and the idea it conveys, and those who would divorce art utterly from ethical purpose. Such mediations are not necessarily weak and colorless. Sometimes I had thought of Dr. Axson's criticism as always gently persuasive, invincibly suave, but on reading over his lectures in the various volumes of the *Pamphlet* I have been struck by his use of the simple pointed utterance, and it has almost seemed to me as if the page, like those sheets of his manuscript which I have examined, were freely underscored by his own hand. For example, he assures Croce and Stoll, who are afraid that our interpretations of Shakespeare are too subtle, that he, for his part, is not at all afraid of our being more subtle than Shakespeare. Or he remarks roundly, "Being fashionable . . . is the worst thing that can happen to literature." Or, in an unpublished lecture, he says of the doctrine of art for

art's sake: "I have interested myself a bit from time to time in certain purely artistic literary movements, like Pre-Raphaelitism, free verse, impressionism, etc., but cannot keep my interest at the boiling point." Or he devotes one of his earlier essays to Henry Timrod, a sensitive and unfortunate young poet who lived in South Carolina and Georgia, and for whom accordingly Dr. Axson might be expected to entertain an amiable weakness. But no, he refrains from sentiment and remarks firmly, "The simpler emotions, which in the South have for the most part been unsallowed by the pale cast of thought, woke Timrod's muse." Here we may note, by the way, his occasional and calculated use of the rare word that brings a shock of surprise. In the first place, he is varying Shakespeare's "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought." For "sicklied o'er" he puts "unsallowed." Now as far as I can see, this word was coined by Dr. Axson for the nonce, as we say. At least it is not in the Oxford English Dictionary. Such diction is a kind of literary *hors d'oeuvre,* but he never cloyed our taste with such luxuries. He could indulge in a daring bit of style now and again, and humor and shrewdness edged his criticism, but nothing of all this was allowed to go far enough to break rudely into the prevailing urbanity and ease of his work.

Though his interests were never narrowly specialized, I think he turned more and more to Shakespeare in his later years. His lifelong devotion to the drama here found its culminating expression. No one who ever heard him read and interpret a scene from *Macbeth* or *Hamlet* will forget the perfect correlation of gesture and voice and idea, and the rich but never labored commentary. The interpretation of Shakespeare calls for a middle way between the stage and the study: Dr. Axson was always keenly interested in actors, not in the gossip of the greenroom but in the way they set

about their business. His comments on Fritz Leiber's Shakespearean productions, to be found in the Houston *Chronicle* for January 7, 1929, may serve as an example of his running commentary on plays and players. He set little of it down, except occasionally in the form of rough lecture notes, and that is part of our loss. Let me, just for example, speak of a fragment of this kind which I have salvaged. One day I left on his desk a monograph on the staging of Shakespeare's plays. When he brought it back I didn't happen to be in the office, and so he sat down and wrote a foolscap sheet full of comment. I offer a few sentences from it here, not as a finished piece of his prose, for it was scribbled hastily in pencil a few minutes before he went to class, but as a random example of the kind of thing he did all the time, a tiny and inadequate specimen of his lecture style:

> I am confident that stage business was less in Shakespeare's day than in modern performances, where early 19th century traditions of acting have had too much force.
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> I think you will agree with me that Shakespeare's own lines give sufficient stage directions for disposal of groups on the stage, for everything that is not minutiae; and surely the writer is correct in his conclusion that Shakespeare's was a theatre of words, primarily rhetorical and elocutionary, not pictorial; that the elaborateness of scenery in 19th century productions is irrelevant (unfortunate Henry Irving went bankrupt in his magnificent stage settings, good for Tennyson's *Becket,* with its far perspectives of the English world, but out of place in, say, *Macbeth,* where the human drama was obscured by the vast scenery of Scottish moors and hills).
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> It seems to me that the original (not the later) Ben Greet players contrived to give due value to the Shakespearean lines without scenic setting. That company contrived to focus attention on the lines and the action without attracting attention to antiquarian research.

One of the most alluring projects he ever considered was the plan for a book on Shakespeare's minor or subordinate characters, which he often touched on in conversation and which he mentions in his Shakespeare series of the spring of

1929. His friends thought the subject an ideal one; his gift of getting full value out of Shakespeare's text, reading between the lines without interpolation or arbitrary fantasy, would here have appeared at its best.

But the very humility that kept him from publishing quickly and confidently was characteristic and endearing. The positive achievement of Dr. Axson was greater than can be indicated in any specific way; there is an ultimate distinction of personality which defies analysis or imitation, and that Dr. Axson had. Dr. Johnson hit it off once when he was talking of Burke: "Yes, sir," said he, "if a man were to go by chance at the same time with Burke under a shed, to shun a shower, he would say,—'this is an extraordinary man.' If Burke should go into a stable to see his horse drest, the ostler would say—'we have had an extraordinary man here.' " What Dr. Axson gave cannot be adequately defined, but of this we are sure, that he alone could give it. Beyond academic accomplishments and honors, even beyond the fascinating record of that life which touched American culture at so many points, beyond any specific word or deed—lies the mystery of his noble personality, the free interplay of intelligence and feeling, the simple courtesy that was also a magnificent courtliness, the humility and charity that shone as by their own light. In the presence of these memories we stand today, not altogether sorrowful, somewhat abashed, more than all else proud and grateful.

ALAN DUGALD MCKILLOP.